

THE AMERICAN POLITICS GROUP

A-Level Engagement Project

Caitlin Lewis and Dr. Pete Finn



‘At its heart, the APG is a community dedicated to the study of American politics, history and culture and the enormous impact they have on the world. This competition has shown just how much interest there is among young people to engage with the subject.’

Dr Katie Pruszyński, Vice-Chair, American Politics Group

DEADLINE

1 February 2027

ONLINE CONFERENCE

4 November 2026

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P.D.Finn@greenwich.ac.uk

TABLE OF CONTENTS

WHO WE ARE.....	3
THE DETAILS	4
What is the PSA?.....	4
What is the APG A-Level Engagement Project?.....	4
Why should students participate?	5
Essay Prizes	6
What do students need to know before they begin?	6
THE CONFERENCE	8
Project Affiliates.....	8
The Panels.....	9
THE QUESTIONS	11
Question 1.....	12
Question 2.....	13
Question 3.....	14
Question 4.....	15
THE REFLECTION	17
HOW ENTRIES ARE MARKED	18
The Marking Rubric.....	18
AI Policy.....	19
EXEMPLAR RESPONSES.....	21
GLOSSARY.....	25
PLANNING	27
The Planning Grid	27
Common Pitfalls	28
REFERENCING	29
What is Harvard referencing?	29
Why is it important?	29
How to Harvard reference.....	29

WHO WE ARE



Dr. Pete Finn, SFHEA

Lecturer in International Politics and Lead Organiser
University of Greenwich

Pete Finn is a Lecturer in International Relations at the University of Greenwich. He holds a Doctorate from Kingston University, holds SFHEA status, and is Web Team Lead of the American Politics Group of the Political Studies Association. He co-runs a long-running commentary series focused on US elections for the LSE United States Politics and Policy site. His work focuses on elections, the Official Record, and oversight of national security.



Caitlin Lewis

PhD Student and Co-Organiser
University of Manchester

Caitlin Lewis is a PhD student at the University of Manchester specialising in American political history, with a particular focus on the Civil Rights Movement and the Kennedy administration. Alongside her doctoral research, Caitlin is a Teaching Assistant at the University of Manchester and a Humanities Lecturer at Manchester Metropolitan University International College.



Dr. Katie Pruszyński

Vice-Chair, American Politics Group

Dr Katie Pruszyński is the Vice-Chair of the American Politics Group and an independent political analyst. She completed her doctoral training at the University of Sheffield in 2025, gaining a PhD in Political Psychology. Her expertise spans disinformation, Trumpism and trust, and she is a regular contributor to broadcast and print media on those subjects. She is currently writing a book on the impacts of disinformation on our everyday lives.



Dr. Dafydd Townley

Chair, American Politics Group

Dafydd Townley is a Senior Teaching Fellow and part of the University of Portsmouth's Professional Military Education team. He is the academic programme lead for all the Aviator Development courses at RAF Halton in Buckinghamshire. His primary research is the US national security politics, publishing works on US intelligence oversight, cyber policy, professional military education, defence procurement, and presidential politics. He is one of the four co-editors of the forthcoming *Routledge Handbook of Professional Military Education*, due for publication in 2027. He is also one of the co-editors in chief of *Political Studies Review*.

THE DETAILS

What is the PSA?

The Political Studies Association (PSA), founded in 1950, is the UK's professional body for the study of politics.

The PSA's members are people who research and teach politics. This includes university academics, postgraduate researchers and, through its School Membership category, A-Level teachers in schools and colleges. It runs the largest annual politics conference in the UK, publishes three of the discipline's leading journals (*Political Studies*, *Politics* and the *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*) and awards prizes for research within politics.

Within the PSA sit specialist groups. They are networks of academics who work on a shared area of research within the broader area of politics. The American Politics Group is one of these. Founded in 1974, our first conference was held at the University of Keele in January 1975, the APG is a major professional organisation in the UK for people whose work concentrates on the government and politics of the United States. We run our own annual conference and colloquium and grant several awards.

What is the APG A-Level Engagement Project?

The APG A-Level Engagement Project includes an essay competition designed for A-Level Politics students. It is open to sixth forms and colleges across the UK and intends to strengthen the relationship between further and higher education. It also aims to develop sustained engagement between the APG, the PSA and A-Level teachers and tutors and to foster longer-term interest in the study of American politics.

The essay competition is now in its second year and is delivered in partnership with the *Financial Times* Schools Programme and the PSA. Students are offered a choice of questions on US politics and will be expected to write a 1,300-word essay and a 200-word reflection (there is a section below on reflective writing). Teachers must submit their students' essays by emailing p.d.finn@greenwich.ac.uk no later than 1 February 2027. Participating students will receive bespoke support in developing their essays, including an online conference with six project affiliates comprising A-Level teachers and university lecturers. Every essay is marked and receives written feedback from academic experts.

The competition sits alongside the APG's free online conference for A-Level students on 4 November 2026, which introduces the themes the competition draws on. Students can enter the competition without attending the conference and attend the conference without entering.

Why should students participate?

For students

Year 12 students will get a head start on a section of the A-Level course they have not yet studied. The US section is one of the challenging parts of A-Level Politics for most students, largely because it asks them to discuss an unfamiliar political system. Entering the competition in Year 12 introduces students to the key themes and ideas in US politics before they are introduced in the classroom.

For year 13 students, the competition will help to solidify an understanding of the US government and politics. It is also a brilliant opportunity for students to explore aspects of US politics that they are interested in prior to their exams in late Spring 2027.

Students will receive feedback from academics who teach US politics at university or at A-Level. Every entrant, not only the winners, gets written comments with suggestions on how to improve their writing skills.

Taking part can also strengthen students' UCAS applications. Entering a national competition is something concrete to write about in a personal statement, and it carries more weight than a general claim to be interested in politics. If a student's essay is selected for a prize, they will have a published piece of writing before they leave school. Students who do not win will still receive a certificate of participation that they can refer to in their applications.

Students find out what studying politics is really like at university level. They are given the opportunity to explore a question and build an argument in whatever creative direction they wish. This is a great way for students to work out whether a politics degree is for them.

For teachers

The essay competition maps onto the A-Level specification. The question and sources sit within Edexcel 9PL0 Component 3 (Comparative Politics: USA) and AQA 7152 Paper 2 (Government and Politics of the USA). Time spent on the competition is not time taken away from the course,

and it will help students begin to understand US politics. Everything students need is in this pack: the marking rubric, annotated exemplar essays, a glossary and a planning grid.

The rubric is published, so students have a clear guide of what we are looking for. The exemplars are annotated, so the standard is shown rather than described. The source pack is free to access, so no student is disadvantaged.

Feedback goes to everyone, so no student's effort is wasted.

Essay Prizes

There are five prize categories: the best discussion of a social problem, the best use of evidence, the most original essay, the best argument and the best overall essay.

The best overall essay receives a £100 book voucher, a ticket to the 2027 APG colloquium and paid return travel to it (up to £130). The essay will also be published on the PSA website if the student wishes. Winners of the other prize categories will receive a £50 book voucher and a bespoke prize certificate. Their essays will also be published on the APG website if they wish.

All winners will be announced in the American Politics Group and Political Studies Association newsletters and in the *Financial Times* 'Schools Digest'.

All participating students will receive individual feedback and a certificate of submission.

Students being considered for prizes will be invited, along with a member of staff from their school or college, to discuss their entries with the project team before final decisions are made. These meetings will take place online via Microsoft Teams.

What do students need to know before they begin?

Who can enter? The competition is open to students who are studying A-Level Politics or a related subject such as History or Sociology. Students taking equivalent qualifications, such as Scottish Highers or the International Baccalaureate, are also welcome to enter.

We know that most Year 12 students will not yet have studied the US section of the course, so the questions have been designed to be as accessible as possible for students with little or no prior knowledge of US politics.

What are the questions? Students choose one question from the list in this pack. They must answer it as written and may not change or narrow the wording.

What is the word count? The essay should be 1,300 words, excluding the bibliography or reference list. Essays can be up to 10% under or over this, so anything between 1,170 and 1,430 words is accepted. Essays over 1,430 words will be read up to that point and no further. Students will also write a 200-word reflection piece that is not included in the 1,300-word count. For advice on reflective writing, see [this page](#).

When is the deadline? 1 February 2027. Late entries cannot be accepted.

How are essays submitted? Teachers or tutors should submit essays on behalf of their students by emailing them to the Lead Organiser, Dr Pete Finn, at P.D.Finn@greenwich.ac.uk. The competition cover sheet should be the first page of each submission and is not included in the word count. The cover sheet can be found on this [page](#) under 'essay submission and cover sheet'.

Do essays need to be referenced? Essays must include references. We understand this may be daunting for students who have not used a referencing system before. However, referencing is an important skill to develop for university, so we have included [referencing advice](#) in this pack.

How will the essays be judged? Essays will be marked against the [rubric](#) published in this pack, and we strongly recommend that students read it before they begin writing. The judges are academics and teachers who research and teach US politics at UK universities.

Can students use Artificial Intelligence? Students cannot use AI in their essays. All students and teachers should read our [AI policy](#) before students begin writing. To be considered for the competition, students must agree with the statement on generative AI tools. Students may use spelling and grammar checkers in tools such as Microsoft Word and Google Docs.

THE CONFERENCE

The key details of the conference:

Date: November 4 2026

Time: 13:30-15:30

Location: Online

Cost: Free

Project Affiliates



Dr. Rob McMahon

Teacher of Politics
Radley College

Rob McMahon is Head of the Politics Department at Radley College and is the co-author of the forthcoming guide *Government and Politics of the United States* (Bloomsbury Academic). He is a specialist in US Government and Politics and has more than twenty years of teaching experience.



Sophie Stanford

PhD Student and Teaching Assistant
University of Manchester

Sophie is a PhD candidate and Teaching Assistant at The University of Manchester whose research focuses on U.S. foreign relations, the Cold War, and transnational social movements. Her thesis, titled 'Transitional Justice or Cold War Manipulation?: Situating Redress for Japanese Internment Within the Context of International Geopolitics During the Reagan Admin.



Dr. Kenn Rushworth

Lecturer of Politics
University of Manchester

Dr Kenn Rushworth is a Politics teacher at the University of Manchester. He has lead modules on Comparative and British politics and has additionally taught courses on the politics of policy making, quantitative data analysis, and concepts of power and statehood in politics. He has supervised award winning dissertation students and provided an excellent standard of teaching and pastoral support for numerous students across both the University of Manchester and Liverpool John Moores University.

**Dr. Adam Burns**

Teacher of Politics

Brighton College

Dr. Adam Burns is a historian and author with over 20 years' experience in teaching. He is Head of Politics at Brighton College and the Schools Lead for the British Association for American Studies. He has authored and edited five books, alongside numerous articles and book chapters. His current projects include two edited collections: *Sport and Politics in Twenty-First Century Britain* and *Teaching Social Science*.

The Panels

Panel A: The 2026 Midterms

Dr. Pete Finn**The University of Greenwich****The Midterm Results as they Stand**

The day after the 2026 midterms, this talk will look at the results as they stand and what they suggest about the state of American politics. It will consider what this means for President Trump and the wider Republican Party, but also where it leaves the Democratic Party as both parties look ahead to the 2028 presidential election. This talk will also highlight key aspects of the FT-APG Essay Competition.

Caitlin Lewis**The University of Manchester****The Midterms in Context**

American politics never fails to give us something to talk about, and these midterms have been no exception. This talk will discuss the controversies that have emerged from the campaign, ranging from the extortionate sums of money spent, the rise of brutal attack adverts and deceptive AI generated content, and personal scandals that have engulfed candidates along the way.

Panel B: Preparing for your A-Level exam

How to be a Great Writer! Part I

Sophie Stanford

The University of Manchester

Writing a great essay requires more than a strong argument; it also depends on how ideas are organised and evidence is deployed. This talk will explore different approaches to structuring an essay. It will examine how ideas can be developed logically and how a range of sources can be critically evaluated and integrated to support the argument outlined in your introduction and conclusion.

Bringing your A Game to your A-Level Politics Exam

Rob McMahon

Radley College

Rob McMahon gives his top tips for putting your best foot forward in your A-Level Politics exam. Drawing on years of experience, Rob will share advice on how to plan, structure and write a brilliant answer to an A-Level Politics exam question.

How to be a Great Writer! Part II

Dr. Kenn Rushworth

The University of Manchester

Many students feel the urge to focus heavily on the mid sections of their essays, whilst introductions and conclusions are sometimes treated as something to ‘get out the way’. This session will offer guidance on writing strong introductions and conclusions, helping students to improve both their writing and their grades. It will focus on how to frame an argument, map out an essay and bring points together effectively.

THE QUESTIONS

Students choose one of the questions below to answer.

1. "The office makes the President. The President does not make the office." Analyse and evaluate this statement with relation to Donald Trump.
2. To what degree do the results of the 2026 midterms provide evidence that voters generally turn against the President's party at midterm elections?
3. Evaluate the view that the United States is better described as a flawed democracy than as a model for others.
4. "Elections in the United States are decided by votes against political parties rather than for them." Critically analyse this statement.

For each question there is a range of sources to help students get started. The sources are by no means an exhaustive list, and students do not need to use them if they do not wish to. They are also expected to find additional sources to support their argument. Beyond the materials listed below, there is an extensive list of resources available [on this FT Schools Programme page](#). There is also advice on putting your essay together, as well as some discussion of generative artificial intelligence, [on this page](#).

For more general support, there is also a list of sources below.

Previous presidents:

Miller Center, University of Virginia (no date). *U.S. Presidents*. Available at: <https://millercenter.org/president> (Accessed: 9 October 2026).

The Executive Branch:

National Constitution Center (no date). *Article II: Executive Branch*. Available at: <https://constitutioncenter.org/the-constitution/articles/article-ii> (Accessed: 9 October 2026).

Executive Orders:

Peters, G. and Woolley, J.T. (2026). *Executive Orders*. The American Presidency Project. Available at: <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/statistics/data/executive-orders> (Accessed: 9 October 2026).

Presidential Vetoes:

Peters, G. and Woolley, J.T. (2026). *Presidential Vetoes*. The American Presidency Project. Available at: <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/statistics/data/presidential-vetoes> (Accessed: 9 October 2026).

Question 1

"The office makes the President. The President does not make the office." Analyse and evaluate this statement with relation to Donald Trump.

Getting started:

This question is really about structure and agency. Does the office shape whoever occupies it, or can an individual reshape the office itself? Students should think about the presidency's formal and informal powers. Richard Neustadt's argument that presidential power is essentially 'the power to persuade' could be a useful starting point. It may also be useful to think about the effect of an individual's charisma and popularity on how much they can achieve in office.

Essays should not be a list of things Trump has done. The question is about the relationship between a person and an institution. Every example needs to answer: did the office stop him, or did he change the office?

Sources:

Neustadt, R.E. (1960). *Presidential power: the politics of leadership*. New York: Wiley.

Schlesinger, A.M. (1989). *The imperial presidency*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Goldsmith, J. and Bauer, B. (2025). 'Trump's Impact on Executive Power, Eleven Months In', *American Enterprise Institute*, 18 December. Available at: <https://www.aei.org/commentary/trumps-impact-on-executive-power-eleven-months-in/> (Accessed: 9 October 2026).

Lopez, D. (2025). '3 ways Trump is acting like a king and bypassing the Constitution's checks and balances on presidential authority', *The Conversation*, 24 February. Available at:

<https://theconversation.com/3-ways-trump-is-acting-like-a-king-and-bypassing-the-constitutions-checks-and-balances-on-presidential-authority-249347> (Accessed: 9 October 2026).

Pazzanese, C. (2020). 'Has Trump remade the presidency?', *The Harvard Gazette*, 4 February. Available at: <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2020/02/new-book-looks-at-how-trump-has-resaped-the-presidency/> (Accessed: 9 October 2026).

Pruessen, R.W. (2026). 'Donald Trump: Triple Threat corrupter of presidential power', *USAPP: American Politics and Policy*, 25 September. Available at: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2026/09/25/donald-trump-presidential-power-corruption/> (Accessed: 9 October 2026).

Question 2

To what degree do the results of the 2026 midterms provide evidence that voters generally turn against the President's party at midterm elections?

Getting started:

Losing seats at the midterms is one of the most reliable patterns in American politics for the party that hold the White House. Students should think about the different reasons why voters are likely to turn against the president's party at the midterms, such as lower turnout, the president's approval rating and a wish to balance power between the parties. The question asks, 'to what degree', so students should weigh how far the 2026 midterm results support their explanation, rather than simply describing the results.

Sources:

Jones, J.M. (2018). 'Midterm seat loss averages 37 for unpopular presidents', *Gallup*, 12 September. Available at: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/242093/midterm-seat-loss-averages-unpopular-presidents.aspx> (Accessed: 9 October 2026).

Rothenberg, S. (2022). 'Learning from the 1998 and 2002 midterms', *Roll Call*, 7 September. Available at: <https://rollcall.com/2022/09/07/learning-from-the-1998-and-2002-midterms/> (Accessed: 9 October 2026).

Strong, R.A. (2026). 'For 80 years, the president's party has almost always lost House seats in midterm elections, a pattern that makes the 2026 congressional outlook clear', *The*

Conversation, 19 January. Available at: <https://theconversation.com/for-80-years-the-presidents-party-has-almost-always-lost-house-seats-in-midterm-elections-a-pattern-that-makes-the-2026-congressional-outlook-clear-271605> (Accessed: 9 October 2026).

FT Podcasts (2026) *Mortgages, diesel and the US midterms*. Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/68bf1530-801b-4f1b-9673-d430841d2a0f?syn-25a6b1a6=1> (Accessed: 23 October 2026).

Question 3

Evaluate the view that the United States is better described as a flawed democracy than as a model for others.

Getting started:

This question is about how democracy is measured and who gets to decide what a good one looks like. Students should start by defining their terms. “Flawed democracy” is a category used by the Economist Intelligence Unit’s Democracy Index, which has placed the United States in that group rather than among “full democracies” since 2016. It is worth looking at what that label means and how the scores are calculated. Students could weigh the features that make the United States a model for others, such as its written constitution, its separation of powers or its free press, against the features that suggest it is flawed, such as the Electoral College, gerrymandering, the role of money in elections and falling public trust in institutions.

Sources:

Little, A.T. and Meng, A. (2024). ‘What We Do and Do Not Know about Democratic Backsliding,’ *PS: Political Science & Politics*. 57(2), pp. 224-229. [doi:10.1017/S1049096523001038](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096523001038)

Schulman, J. and Wike, R. (2026). ‘Multiple indicators show a decline in the health of America’s democracy in 2025’, *Pew Research Center*, 15 April. Available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2026/04/15/multiple-indicators-show-a-decline-in-the-health-of-americas-democracy-in-2025/> (Accessed: 9 October 2026).

Economist Intelligence Unit (2026). *Democracy Index 2025*. London: Economist Intelligence Unit. Available at: <https://eongrp.co/DemocracyIndex2025> (Accessed: 11 October 2026).

Freedom House (2026). *United States: Freedom in the World 2026 Country Report*. Available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/united-states/freedom-world/2026> (Accessed: 11 October 2026).

FT Podcasts (2026) *Martin Wolf on the US midterms: Is American democracy safe?* Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/dcb61611-f2e7-4974-a4a6-8c565253dacf?syn-25a6b1a6=1> (Accessed: 23 October 2026).

Question 4

"Elections in the United States are decided by votes against political parties rather than for them." Critically analyse this statement.

Getting started:

This question is about why people vote the way they do. Political scientists call the idea in the statement negative partisanship. The argument, associated with Alan Abramowitz and Steven Webster, is that American voters are increasingly driven by dislike of the other party rather than loyalty to their own. Students should start by looking at the evidence for this. Surveys show that Americans' feelings towards the opposing party have become much more negative over time, while feelings towards their own party have changed far less.

Sources:

Fiorina, M.P. (2016). 'Has the American public polarized?', *Hoover Institution*, 14 September. Available at: <https://www.hoover.org/research/has-american-public-polarized> (Accessed: 9 October 2026).

Hunt, C. (2026). 'Americans keep voting for scandal-prone candidates because they just don't want the other party to win', *The Conversation*, 22 June. Available at: <https://theconversation.com/americans-keep-voting-for-scandal-prone-candidates-because-they-just-dont-want-the-other-party-to-win-284913> (Accessed: 9 October 2026).

Pew Research Center (2022). *As partisan hostility grows, signs of frustration with the two-party system*. Available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2022/08/09/as-partisan-hostility-grows-signs-of-frustration-with-the-two-party-system/> (Accessed: 9 October 2026).

Shepard, S., Kiley, J., Cerda, A., Van Green, T. and Gracia, S. (2026). 'Americans continue to view both the Republican and Democratic parties negatively', *Pew Research Center*, 1 May. Available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2026/05/01/americans-continue-to-view-both-the-republican-and-democratic-parties-negatively/> (Accessed: 9 October 2026).

THE REFLECTION

As well as the 1,300-word essay, students will be asked to write a 200-word reflection piece. Reflective writing is an important and empowering skill and adopted in many professional environments. It is also a useful way for students to think about how to improve their writing and research process in the future. In the context of this essay competition, it is also their chance to communicate to the competition team how their thinking and research fed into the writing of their essay.

Reflective writing can often be uncomfortable and difficult to begin. To help students get started, we would recommend using Gibbs' Reflective Cycle. An example of reflective writing can also be found below. This reflection is written by Lead Organiser Pete Finn and is based on the following post:

Finn, P. (2026) 'The 2026 Midterms: Early and mail in voting means that the election starts weeks before November.' *LSE USAPP* (10 September). Available at: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2026/09/10/election-starts-before-november/> (Accessed: 29 September 2026).

'For this post I was interested in mapping the role that mail and early voting would play in the 2026 midterms. The post was written for the blog site USAPP, which is run by the London School of Economics, and the post sits within a comment series on US elections that I have co-run since 2018.

Before I began writing I first had to detail the place of early and mail in voting in recent US elections and the order in which US states would begin early and mail voting in advance of the election. As such, I, firstly, collected statistics related to previous elections and, secondly, created a table mapping the start dates for early and mail voting across all US states. The data on start dates became Table 1 in my post.

The first two sections of the post are mainly factual and shaped around the date detailed above, while some of the politics around early and mail voting are explored in the final section. In general, I would say the post was a success, and I certainly always enjoy exploring the US electoral calendar. However, if I had more space, it might have been useful to layer information about, and the discussion of, Senate races.

HOW ENTRIES ARE MARKED

The Marking Rubric

Knowledge:

The degree to which an essay demonstrates knowledge of the material related to their chosen essay question. Taking into account the particular topic the essay focuses on.

Argument:

The degree to which an essay provides a clear and consistent argument and narrative.

Evidence:

The degree to which the argument and narrative of an essay is backed up with relevant data (i.e., quantitative material) and/or textual (i.e., qualitative) evidence.

This includes the degree to which the source of data and textual evidence is provided.

Writing:

The degree to which an essay is written with clarity and the argument and narrative are intelligible.

Reflective Piece:

The degree to which the rationale, research and drafting which feed into the final essay are explained.

FT-APG A-Level Essay Competition Marking Rubric:

	To no degree (1)	To some degree (2)	To a sound degree (3)	To an impressive degree (4)
Knowledge				
Argument				
Evidence				
Writing				
Reflection				

AI Policy

When signing and submitting the cover sheet, students must confirm they have acted in accordance with the statement below:

‘I confirm that this essay is my own work and that I did not use generative artificial intelligence tools to generate the content of this essay.’

Essay judges reserve the right to ask for information about how submissions are written. For clarity, this statement does not preclude the use of spell and grammar checking features of word processing tools such as Word and Google Docs.

This competition is an opportunity for students to develop and showcase their thinking and ideas, and submitting an essay generated by AI defeats its entire purpose. However, it is also worth understanding why this matters beyond the competition. At university, submitting work produced by AI is treated as academic misconduct, which is in the same category as plagiarism. Plagiarism is when somebody passes off another person’s ideas or words as their own. This is why students need to use a referencing system. Referencing gives credit to the scholar who had the original idea and allows other scholars to locate the source of the information.

Universities investigate suspected cases through formal academic misconduct panels, and the consequences can be serious. Marks can be capped or reduced to zero, students can receive formal warnings on their record or be suspended and, in the most serious or repeated cases, students can be expelled.

This competition is designed to give students a taste of university-level work, and that includes university-level expectations of academic integrity. The judges are looking for an original voice, a solid argument and genuine engagement with the question. A generic, AI-produced essay is unlikely to offer any of these and risks disqualification.

GenAI is a fast-moving area, and like others in education and beyond, we need to develop our practice in line with changes. We will engage with concerns around GenAI in good faith and in line with best practices and our capacity at the time of the marking of essays as it stands in Spring 2027. For those submitting to the competition, we ask that you likewise abide by the above statement in similarly good faith.

If the project team suspects that a submission has not kept to the spirit of the competition, they may ask the student to clarify certain points and give them a right to reply. In some cases, this may mean an essay is not accepted as an entry.

You can also find more on the reasoning behind our position on the use of AI: [here](#). **However, in short, we believe writing is awesome and are keen for students to use this competition to develop their writing skills.**

EXEMPLAR RESPONSES

We would like to extend our congratulations to the winners of last year's competition.

The prize winners were as follows:

- **Best overall essay:** Matthew Fong, Tonbridge School
- **Best argument:** Eleanor Carney, Godolphin and Latymer School
- **Most original essay:** Charlie Hawkins, Eastbourne College
- **Best use of evidence (joint winner):** Ifeoluwakiishi Bayo-Awonaiké, Christ's Hospital
- **Best use of evidence (joint winner):** Zac Woodcock, Brighton College
- **Best discussion of a social problem:** Caitlin Arthur, St Mary's Catholic School, Newcastle-upon-Tyne

For inspiration in getting started, here are some annotated exemplar responses from last year's winners.

Eleanor Carney, Godolphin and Latymer School

Best argument

Question: Does President Donald J. Trump represent an anomaly or reflect a broader strand of thought and action in American politics?

Knowledge Argument Evidence Writing

This essay will argue that whilst Trump's first term could be considered an anomaly ...	Argument The argument of the essay is made clear within the introduction and is defended throughout.
The Tea Party Movement from 2009-2011 was a grassroots movement that emerged from the 2008 financial crisis.	Knowledge Precise, dated knowledge used.
A split that can be seen in a YouGov poll that found only 53% of Republicans would also consider themselves MAGA.	Evidence Specific and relevant statistic supporting the argument made.

Trump is therefore not the curator of America's political polarisation, but its most forceful amplifier.

Writing

Direct writing that is straight to the point.

Charlie Hawkins, Eastbourne College

Most original essay

Question: Does President Donald J. Trump represent an anomaly or reflect a broader strand of thought and action in American politics?

Knowledge Argument Evidence Writing

That may be the case when he is compared to Presidents Barack Obama and Joe Biden, but in reality, ... his [Trump's] approach to politics, foreign policy and immigration policy are nothing new in American politics.

Argument

The three themes named here become the structure of the essay.

Around 100 years ago, Louisianan politician Huey Long ran a campaign focused on "making the common man feel important"

Knowledge

This is a specific piece of knowledge that looks at the past and allows for a comparison to Trump.

Between 2009 and 2015, the Obama administration deported 2.5 million people (Marshall, 2016).

Evidence

A precise figure offered to support an argument made.

Finally, turning to immigration policy, historical through lines can be seen.

Writing

Clear signposting. The reader always knows which of the three themes is being discussed.

Ifeoluwakiishi Bayo-Awonaiki, Christ's Hospital

Best use of evidence (joint winner)

Question: Does President Donald J. Trump represent an anomaly or reflect a broader strand of thought and action in American politics?

Knowledge Argument Evidence Writing

Politico's Jack Shafer was under the opinion that Donald Trump is indeed an anomaly ...	Evidence Opens the debate with a named commentator's view, so the argument starts from evidence rather than assertion.
One way that Donald Trump has presented himself as an anomaly in American politics is through his entry into politics.	Writing A clear topic sentence. It links straight back to the question and tells the reader what the paragraph will do. This strengthens the structure.
Like Polk, Donald Trump has made use of executive orders to quicken the pace of actions ...	Knowledge A precise historical parallel, rather than a general comparison.

Zac Woodcock, Brighton College

Best use of evidence (joint winner)

Question: Does President Donald J. Trump represent an anomaly or reflect a broader strand of thought and action in American politics?

Knowledge Argument Evidence Writing

President Donald J Trump is not just an outlier, but an extreme anomaly to not just America, but frankly the world.	Argument A clear position given within the introduction of the essay.
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This is absolutely a global mainstream shift, as we can see through the surge in support for Reform UK ...	Knowledge Looks beyond the USA to the UK. Demonstrates a good level of knowledge, without going into too much detail and drifting from the question.
A YouGov poll found immigration was the most important issue facing the USA in 2024.	Evidence Names the pollster, so the claim can be checked. This demonstrates that the argument being made is backed up with solid evidence. Adding the figure itself would make it stronger still.
Donald Trump is an anomaly, and his actions are arguably the most extreme ever by a sitting US president.	Writing The conclusion answers the question directly and matches the argument laid out in the introduction.

GLOSSARY

This is by no means an exhaustive list of key definitions often used in discussions surrounding American Politics. However, this should give students a good start.

Term	Meaning
Bipartisan	Supported by both the Democrats and the Republicans.
Bill of Rights	The first ten amendments to the United States Constitution.
Checks and balances	The design principle that each branch of government can limit the others because power is divided among three branches of government, the Legislative, the Executive and the Judiciary.
Divided government	When the President's party does not control one or both chambers of Congress.
Executive order	A directive from the President to the federal government. It has legal force but can be undone by a later President or struck down by the courts. In a small number of cases, all parties compete in the same primary for slots on the eventual ballot.
Exit poll	A survey of voters taken as they leave polling places and then used to estimate how different groups voted.
Filibuster	A Senate procedure to delay or block a vote on a bill.
Gerrymandering	Drawing district boundaries to favour one party.
Incumbent	The person currently holding the office.
Imperial president	The idea that the US Presidency has grown to be more powerful than what the Constitution intended.
Midterms	Congressional and state elections held halfway through a presidential term.
Polarisation	The widening gap between the two parties, their ideologies and their beliefs.

Term	Meaning
Primary	An election in which a party's voters choose its candidate.
Separation of powers	How the federal government is divided into three equal branches (the Executive, Legislative and Judiciary) to prevent the concentration of power.
Swing voter	Sometimes referred to as a floating voter. A voter who is not affiliated to either political party and might realistically support either.
Turnout	The share of eligible people who actually vote. In the USA it is far lower at midterms than at presidential elections.
Veto	The President's power to reject a bill passed by Congress. Congress can override it with a two-thirds vote in both chambers.

PLANNING

The Planning Grid

This planning grid will help students get started with their essay.

Stage	Prompt	My answer
My overall argument	In one sentence, what is my answer to the question? This should be within the first few sentences of the essay and be reiterated throughout the essay.	
My evidence	What two or three specific pieces of evidence support it? How do I know that my overall argument is the right one? This could include scholarly arguments (the literature) and primary sources.	
The counterargument	What would someone who disagrees with me argue? Why?	
Countering the counterargument	Why does my overall argument survive that objection? Although the essay is not a balanced argument, good essays still refer to and acknowledge counterarguments. The best essays explain why these counterarguments are limited.	

Argument and evidence:

- As developing academics, we want students to start to shape their intellectual identity and, in so doing, base their writing on the factual material that you engage with, and the debates related to your chosen essay question.
- As such, rather than just give an opinion, students need to provide an evidenced argument. They can acknowledge other points of view, explain how they differ from their own, and why the evidence suggests that their argument is correct.
- In short, students should look to evidence their argument and avoid unsubstantiated polemic (by which we mean shouty writing that is not based on a sound factual foundation).

Common Pitfalls

- Students often fall into the trap of describing rather than analysing. Rather than regurgitating everything they know about the topic, they should think about the ‘so what?’.
- Essays should not sit on the fence. University-level essays require a clear judgement and a solid argument. However, although students are not writing a balanced argument, they should still acknowledge the counterargument and then explain why it is limited.
- Evidence should be used with purpose. Students should not drop in random pieces of evidence, statistics or quotations without a reason. They should elaborate on the evidence and explain why it is significant. What does it prove? What does it not prove?
- Essays should not save the argument for the conclusion. The overall argument should be stated clearly in the introduction and defended throughout.
- A university-level essay is not looking for a personal opinion.

REFERENCING

What is Harvard referencing?

As academics and students of US politics, it is important for us to demonstrate the source of our knowledge and give credit to other scholars for their ideas. We do this by referencing. Being able to reference correctly is an essential skill that every university student must learn.

There are many different types of referencing, such as Chicago, APA and MLA, but for this competition students we ask you to use Harvard style. Students should reference whenever they have used a quotation, idea, fact or data point from somebody else.

A great source of material is the Schools Programme of the Financial Times.

Why is it important?

Referencing is critical to the validity and integrity of an academic essay. There are two main reasons why referencing is so important.

- If an idea, argument, figure, phrase or quotation is not the student's own, referencing is how they make this clear. It ensures that the scholar responsible for that idea gets the credit they deserve. It also adds integrity to the argument, as it shows the essay is built on reading and evidence rather than opinion.
- If another scholar wanted to find the source of an argument, they would need to be able to trace it back to the original. This is why academic essays need a bibliography, as it contains all the necessary information, such as the author, date, title, publisher, edition and page numbers.

How to Harvard reference

Harvard referencing has two halves, and students need to do both.

1. **In-text citations.** Every time students use someone else's information, ideas or words, they put the author's surname and the year in brackets straight after it: (Peterson, 2021).
2. **Bibliography.** Students then give the full details of everything they cited in a reference list, in alphabetical order by surname.

The in-text citation is a label, and the reference list is where a reader goes to find the source itself. Every citation in the text must have a matching entry in the list.

Part 1: In the text

Situation	Example
Paraphrasing an argument	Age is a more predictable voting factor than gender (Peterson, 2021).
Naming the author in the sentence	Peterson (2021) argues that turnout is the wrong measure.
Quoting directly (add the page)	Peterson (2021, p. 45) calls this "a structural failure, not an accident".
Two authors	(Peterson and Ahmed, 2022)
Three or more authors	(Peterson <i>et al.</i> , 2022)
An organisation, not a person	(Pew Research Center, 2024)
No page numbers	Just leave the page off: (Peterson, 2021)

Part 2: The bibliography

The bibliography should be at the end of the essay, and entries must be organised alphabetically by surname. A book is referenced differently from a journal article, which is referenced differently from a newspaper article. The examples below show how each type of source is referenced. Please note that it is important that students use punctuation and italics correctly.

Type	Formatting	Example
Book	Author, Initial. (Year). <i>Title of Book</i> . Edition if not the first. Place of publication: Publisher.	Schlesinger, A. (1989). <i>The Imperial Presidency</i> . Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
Journal article read online:	Author, Initial. (Year). 'Title of article', <i>Name of Journal</i> , volume number (issue/part number),	Kalman, L. (2020). 'In Retrospect: Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., The Historical Profession, and the Imperial Presidency', <i>Reviews in</i>

Add the DOI if there is one (a permanent link, usually starting 10.); if not, give the URL and access date.	page numbers first–last. doi: 10.0000/example or Available at: URL. Accessed:	<i>American History</i> , 48(2), pp. 316-329. Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/48593712 . (Accessed: 1 October 2026.)
Webpage	Author, or organisation. (Year). <i>Title of the page</i> . Available at: URL (Accessed: date).	National Constitution Center. (no date). <i>Article II: Executive Branch</i> . Available at: https://constitutioncenter.org/the-constitution/articles/article-ii (Accessed: 9 October 2026).
Newspaper or news website article:	Author, Initial. (Year). 'Title of article', <i>Name of Newspaper</i> , day month. Available at: URL (Accessed: date).	Hills, M. (2026). 'Where the US midterm elections will be won and lost', <i>BBC News</i> , 13 October. Available at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cr20wlp09gn3o (Accessed: 14 October 2026.)

If there is no date, students should write (no date) where the year goes.

IF IN DOUBT, REFERENCE IT!